

Chapter 4

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING FAMILY CONNECTIONS



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INTRODUCTION: CHAPTER 4

Foster parents play a critical role in maintaining connections between children and their families. The testimonial at the beginning of this chapter illustrates the powerful impact foster parent support and assistance can have on strengthening a family. It is essential for foster parents to work to create an environment that is supportive of the entire family while strengthening the relationship between the child and his or her family.

Remember, most children placed in foster care are reunified with their families. When foster parents support the entire family, they have the opportunity to have a positive influence on a family forever.

BIRTH PARENT TESTIMONIAL

Dear Foster Families,

I am a birth mom who was involved in the child welfare system. I want to share a little about how I felt before, during, and after my son was in foster care.

I was a young single mother who was overwhelmed and frustrated. I was having great difficulty parenting my overactive son. I was trying to support myself and my son by working a lot of hours. I would get home very late and have to go back to work early the next day. I got to a point that I did not have any time for either of us. I began to do things that I still regret. My frustration got the best of me.

One day my child left for day care and did not come home to me. He had been taken from me because of some things I had done. I was frantic because I did not know where my son was and did not have any contact with him for over 2 weeks. During that time I felt that a part of me was lost, and I did not know if I would ever get it back. I felt upset and depressed and thought, "What have I done?" I felt I had nothing to live for. I made it through only with the support of friends and the love I had for my son. I knew I wasn't a bad person and that I had made mistakes, but I loved my son and wanted to do what was right. I just needed help.

My son first went to a shelter and then to a foster home. He was not happy, and I did not have good communication from the first family. He then went to another foster family that helped both my son and me. They seemed to care how I was doing as well as meeting my son's needs. We started working together on the relationship between my son and me. At first I was mistrusting and not sure how things would go, but we were able to have a relationship that still goes on today. I was grateful to be supported, but I still wanted my son back. I worked really hard, and finally, after almost 2 years in foster care, my son came home to me.

I have had my son back for 3 years now, and I met a wonderful man who I have since married. I now have a second child and together we parent both children. I am grateful for the support of my husband, and all of the people who took the time to help me along the way. It wasn't an easy road, and I wish I never had to travel down it, but I am a better person for it.

In closing, the next time you have a foster child placed in your home, please consider the circumstances the parents are going through. I understand that I am a success and many are not, but it does not mean that birth parents don't feel the same emotions as anyone who loves their child.

Thank you for listening.

A Birth Mom

IT IS A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Foster parents choose to foster for a variety of reasons, but the main goal for most foster parents is to make a difference in the life of a child. Foster parents struggle at times to understand another parent's choices, style of parenting, and overall way of living. They might have concerns about what will happen if the child that is placed with them goes home. In some circumstances, foster parents might feel that the child's parent is not trying hard enough, and, in extreme cases, does not deserve to raise his or her children.

As shown by the testimonial in the beginning of this chapter, parents are also going through many feelings and fears. Below are some feelings that parents may experience.

Feelings and Emotions Parents Experience

- ❖ Parents may experience a tremendous sense of failure; they may have been doing what they believed was their best, but having their child removed is clearly a sign that their best was not good enough.
- ❖ Parents may be angry about the circumstances; whether they show it outwardly or not, they may never agree with the reasons for the removal of their children.
- ❖ Parents may be frustrated that they have to follow a “plan” in order to have their children returned home, or they may feel frustrated because the plan keeps changing.
- ❖ Parents may feel they cannot trust the system; they may feel they have done all they can, and yet their children are still not being returned home.
- ❖ Parents often experience fears about working with you; they might wonder if they will measure up, and they typically feel that you and the case workers hold all the power.

(Adapted from Lutz, 2005)

BENEFITS OF WORKING TOGETHER

Reunification happens in a more timely manner when there is ongoing contact between the child and his or her family. In addition, the child's family is more likely to make changes with the support of the foster family. Eventually, with help, respect, and cooperation from the foster family, the child's family may come to view the foster family as a support system instead of a threat.

In cases where reunification is no longer the permanence goal, families who have learned to trust the foster family can often accept the reality that they cannot care for their children. They may be more willing to discuss options for permanence with the agency to avoid having these options decided for them by the courts.

Overall, the person who receives the biggest benefit when everyone works together is the child. Seeing his or her foster parents and parents working together or getting along can help the child realize that he or she doesn't need to pick one family over another, and it shows the child that adults can get through difficult situations by communicating and working together. This is known as shared parenting and has been shown to enhance outcomes for children.

FAMILY INTERACTION

Family interaction, which used to be known as visitation, benefits a child placed in out-of-home care in a number of ways. First, it is a vehicle to reduce the psychological harm done to a child by separation from his or her family. Family interaction reassures the child that his or her parents still exist, helps give meaning to the separation, and provides hope that reunification can occur. This reassurance can help sustain the child's emotional well-being while waiting for permanence to happen. Family interaction is also an opportunity for a child to experience reassurance from his or her parent that he or she is loved and valued. It is a chance for the child to receive permission from the parents to be happy where he or she is until it is possible for the child to return home. Family interaction is also an opportunity for children to experience changes that the parent may have made. As parents relate to their children in a more positive and healthy manner, children will learn to relate to their parents more positively. Feelings of trust and well-being will be enhanced.

In general, family interaction is an opportunity to establish, promote, and maintain relationships between the child and his or her parents, siblings, and other extended family members. In addition, family interaction is an opportunity for parents to evaluate their own parenting capacities and learn new ways to parent their children. For caseworkers, family interaction is also a way to address any safety concerns, promote the case plan, and support the child's family as they learn to safely care for their children.

Wisconsin policy and practice has shifted from thinking of family interaction as a formal visit in an agency office to face-to-face contact in the most natural setting as possible, such as the home of the parent or out-of-home care provider. In addition, practice encourages inclusion of families in day-to-day activities with their children, such as doctor's appointments, school functions, trips to the park, or other events. This allows parents to retain parenting responsibilities and roles while their children are in out-of-home care.

Frequency of Family Interaction

Parents who have frequent, regular, and meaningful interactions have the best chance of reunification with their children. Therefore, family interaction should occur frequently and in a variety of ways. State policy requires, at a minimum, parents must have face-to-face contacts with their children within 5 working days after the child's placement and on a weekly basis thereafter. Additionally, children shall have other family interactions, such as letters or phone calls, with their parents at least weekly. As a guideline, the frequency of family interaction between parents and their children in out-of-home care should correspond with the child's wishes, age, developmental level, and should be consistent with the child's case plan and permanence goals.

The box below includes some ideas about how to facilitate regular interactions with a child's family and how to include them as a part of the child's day-to-day life in foster care.

Regular Events in Child's Life

- ❖ Inform and invite family members, including siblings, to school functions, sporting events, and community happenings.
- ❖ Encourage parents to attend events without you being present (as appropriate to the child's safety).
- ❖ Take the report card to the parent in a sealed envelope—don't look at it before the parent does.
- ❖ Invite the child's family members, including siblings, to a fun outing with the foster family.

Ideas for Promoting Indirect Contact

- ❖ Send letters and cards to family members about the child's progress.
- ❖ Send copies of report cards, school work, and art projects.
- ❖ Encourage the child to make cards or crafts to take as gifts to visits with his or her family.
- ❖ Make a tape (audio or video) of parents reading a book to the children and play it each evening.

(Adapted from Ginther, et al.)

Family Interaction with Siblings

Although every effort must be made to place siblings together, sometimes this is not possible. Sibling interactions provide an opportunity for siblings to build or maintain family relationships. Children must also have face-to-face interactions with their siblings at least one time per month when they are not seeing each other as part of the family interaction plan. Additional family interactions between siblings must be encouraged, such as contact by phone, letters, and e-mail during the month.

Decreasing or Suspending Family Interaction

Family interaction is critical to helping families reconnect; therefore, it can only be suspended or prohibited for specific reasons by the agency or court. It is important to note that a parent's incarceration or institutionalization does not, in itself, constitute a ground for prohibiting or canceling face-to-face family interaction.

According to Wisconsin State Policy

- ❖ Family interaction can only be prohibited by the agency if a court finds that continued contact is not in the child's best interest.
- ❖ Family interaction can be decreased or suspended (under agency supervision) if there is evidence that the contact is contrary to the safety of the children and this information is documented in the case record.
- ❖ Family interaction **CANNOT** be used as a punishment, reward, or threat to a child [Section HFS 56.09(5)(f)].
- ❖ Foster parents **CANNOT** prohibit family interaction.

Foster Parent's Role

Foster parents have an essential role in preparing a child for face-to-face family interaction. As appropriate, the child should understand when and where the family interaction will take place, for how long it is scheduled, who they can expect to see, and what will happen. In addition, the child should be reminded that after the family interaction, he or she will return to the foster home.

Below are some situations that may occur with families involved in the foster care program and ideas for how foster parents can work through them to help the child and family have successful family interactions.

Failure of a family member to show up for a visit.

Inform the child's caseworker as soon as possible. The caseworker can then discuss any problems with the family interaction plan with the child's parents. It is the caseworker's responsibility to work with the family surrounding failure to participate in interactions with the child.

Family members that arrive unannounced.

The family interaction plan developed by the caseworker will outline the frequency and number of family interactions. Foster parents should have information about the family interaction plan from the caseworker and information about what to do if members of a child's family are stopping by unannounced to the foster home.

Family members who arrive in a state of tension, anger, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Foster parents should have information from the caseworker as to what to do if a member of the child's family is intoxicated or threatening. They may need to decide whether to allow the visit. First, assess the threat of danger, potential injury to the child, and their ability to control the situation. Then the situation should be immediately reported to the child's caseworker.

Family members who call constantly.

Limit calls to a specific time that is both convenient for the foster family and fair to the parents and child. Foster parents can work with the child's caseworker to effectively communicate and enforce plans for contacting the child.

(Adapted from Ginther, et al.)

To access the statewide requirements for family interactions in Wisconsin, go to http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/memos/num_memos/2005/2005-06.htm or ask the child's caseworker for a copy of the agency's family interaction policy.

Sibling Connections

For children in foster care, maintaining and building sibling relationships is as important as having contact with their parents. Siblings who come from homes where abuse and neglect were present often provided care, support and consistency to each other because their parents were unable to do so for various reasons. Keeping siblings together when they are placed in foster care can help reduce some of the trauma associated with being removed from their parents. Siblings often help each other with the transition to a new home and can assist foster parents to find out how to best meet the needs of their brothers and sisters.

Sibling relationships are the longest lasting relationships many people have. Foster parents have unique opportunities to help children sustain and build these crucial relationships. They can have an important impact by assisting with and facilitating the child's relationships with his or her siblings that will likely outlast the time a child is placed in the foster home.

For various reasons, many children are separated from their siblings when they are placed in foster care. Nationally, about 70-75% of children in foster care are separated from at least one sibling. Reasons for separating siblings may include:

- Concerns that an older sibling is too involved in the care of his or her sibling and is not able to be a "kid."
- Concerns that the siblings fight too much or don't get along well.
- Concerns regarding the foster family's ability to care for multiple children with various levels of need.
- Capacity or space limits based on foster care licensing or agency policy which may not be able to accommodate the placement of a large sibling group.
- Safety concerns such as sexualized or extremely aggressive behavior between siblings or other types of victimization.

*(The primary source for information in this section came from the Child Welfare Information Gateway, **Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption**)*

Regardless of the reason, the impact of separating siblings in care has been found to be as traumatic for children as being separated from their parents. It is critical that everyone involved with children who are separated from siblings do all they can to help maintain and enhance these vital connections.

The box on the next page contains some things foster parents can do to assist with maintaining the relationships among siblings if a child or children in the foster home has been separated from his or her brothers or sisters.

Maintaining and Enhancing Sibling Connections:

- ❖ Adhere to Wisconsin's Family Interaction Policy standards regarding sibling interaction.
- ❖ Assist children to maintain multiple forms of contact with siblings such as phone calls, e-mail, letters, and cards.
- ❖ Advocate for participation in family team meetings so that interactions can be coordinated between parents and foster families.
- ❖ Collaborate with the foster families of the siblings of the child in your home to plan joint activities and outings.
- ❖ Provide for and arrange respite which allows siblings to spend time together.
- ❖ Be available to listen and provide support to children as they manage their feelings and emotions regarding sibling contact and being separated.
- ❖ Encourage ongoing contact with siblings.

Additional Ways to Support Family Connections

In addition to keeping family interaction consistent and frequent, there are other things foster parents can do to help children stay connected with their parents, siblings, and extended family.

Other Ideas for Supporting Family Connections

- ❖ Try to give the family as much privacy as possible by going on with the family's normal routine or providing separate space if the interaction occurs in the foster home.
- ❖ Have games and toys available for family members to play together.
- ❖ Take pictures of the child and send them to family members.
- ❖ Maintain phone contact between child, parents, and siblings.
- ❖ Call the parent when the child is sick or not feeling well.
- ❖ Praise and recognize positive parenting by the child's parent.
- ❖ Discuss shopping and clothing purchases and invite the child's family along.
- ❖ Keep the parent informed of the development of the children.

(Adapted from Ginther, et al.)

CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

At times, problems may arise during interactions with a child and his or her family. Foster parents should contact the child's case worker as soon as possible if they have a concern or problem. This may include any events, observations, feelings about something that has occurred, or the child's reactions to family interaction. Because every situation is different, the child's caseworker is in the best position to advise a foster parent about how to handle various issues and address any concerns with all individuals involved in the family interaction plan.

It can be very difficult to work through the confusion and mixed emotions that some children may have. The best way to address confusing or difficult situations is to answer any questions children have with honesty and respect in an age-appropriate manner. Foster parents may also want to consider connecting with other foster parents if a child's interactions with his or her family are becoming challenging. The child's caseworker should be made aware of any concerns related to a child's behavior or reactions to contact with family members.

Problems That May Arise

Below are some common situations that occur with families involved in the foster care program and ideas for how foster parents can work through them.

Family members and foster parents may not get along with one another.

There are many differences that can come between children's families and foster families including values, background, culture, parenting styles and beliefs, education, age, socioeconomic level, and skills. It is important to talk to the parents about their family beliefs, practices, and traditions in order to learn more about them and other members of the child's family. Foster parents may also want to find a positive way to ask the family if there is something that can be done from their point of view that would help the both of you work better together.

Family members are unsure of how to relate to the foster family.

Try to make the child's family feel welcome in the foster home. Talk to parents about their child, since they are the experts on their child. Things to find out might include information about a child's favorite things (e.g., food, toys, games, etc.) or one of their favorite times with the child.

Family members who may be overwhelmed.

Praise and recognize the efforts and positive parenting of the family.

Family members who may feel envy and resentment.

Assure the child's family that they have a very important and irreplaceable role in the child's life. (*Adapted from Ginther, et al.*)

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE SHORT CHAPTERS

Something to consider in closing as you work with children and families:

*1) I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost...I am hopeless
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.*

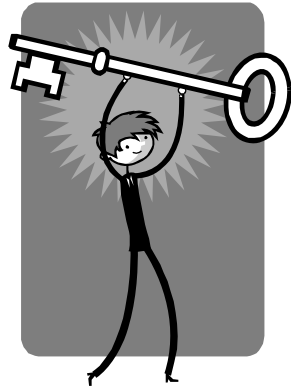
*2) I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.*

*3) I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in...it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.*

*4) I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.*

5) I walk down another street.

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KEY CONCEPTS

CHAPTER 4

- ❖ You play a critical role in maintaining connections between children and their families.
- ❖ Just as you are experiencing many feelings and emotions about children's families, they are also experiencing many feelings and emotions about their children being placed in your home and having to work with you.
- ❖ The person who receives the biggest benefit of foster parents, the child's parents, and caseworkers working together is the **child**.
- ❖ Parents and children who have frequent, regular, and meaningful interactions have the best chance of reunification and success in placement.
- ❖ Try to give the family as much privacy as possible by going on with your normal routine or providing separate space if the interaction occurs in the foster home.
- ❖ Family interaction can only be prohibited by the agency if a court finds that continued contact is not in the child's best interest.
- ❖ You should contact the child's caseworker as soon as possible if you have a concern or problem.
- ❖ Assure the child's family that they have a very important and irreplaceable role in the child's life.